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On: 13 April 2012, At: 03:56

Publisher: Routledge

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## Psychoanalytic Dialogues: The International Journal of Relational Perspectives

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/hpsd20>

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Available online: 12 Apr 2012

**To cite this article:** Doris Brothers Ph.D. (2012): Murakami, Connoisseur of Uncertainty: Commentary on Paper by Thomas Rosbrow, *Psychoanalytic Dialogues: The International Journal of Relational Perspectives*, 22:2, 228-233

**To link to this article:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10481885.2012.666163>

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## Murakami, Connoisseur of Uncertainty: Commentary on Paper by Thomas Rosbrow

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My discussion embroiders around Thomas Rosbrow's view of Murakami as a "trauma analyst." I highlight the ways in which Murakami's writing reflects his keen sensitivity to existential uncertainty and how he seems to understand trauma, much as I do, as a shattering experience that destroys the certainties that organize psychological life and generates efforts at self restoration. Although I share Rosbrow's view that "*After the Quake*" depicts a character's awakening from the dissociative manifestations of trauma, I spell out how my perspective on this process differs from his.

How fitting that I was asked to discuss Thomas Rosbrow's superb paper only days before the long-awaited publication of the English translation of *1Q84* (Murakami, 2011), the 928-page book by Murakami that has been hailed by some reviewers (albeit the minority) as his "magnum opus"! If I were a character in a Murakami story, these seemingly random events would turn out to be, as one of his characters puts it, "more connected than they seem." That we are all more connected than we seem and that much of our connectedness eludes linear, positivistic, Cartesian modes of observation is, I believe, one of the central tropes in Murakami's work.

My connection to Tom Rosbrow, on the other hand, is quite straightforward—we are both relationally oriented analysts, like-minded in our enthusiasm for Murakami and similar in our understanding of his writing. I found myself nodding in agreement with all but one of his assertions (see below). Yet, if our shared perspectives make us a pair, then we could be Murakami characters ourselves. Pairs and twosomes of every stripe, frequently siblings, but also friends, lovers, spouses, and even moons (*1Q84*), figure importantly in all of his fiction. The two women friends, Keiko and Shima, in "U.F.O. in Kushiro" (Murakami, 2001b); the two psychic sisters, Malta and Creta, in *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* (Murakami, 1998); and Mari, the sister who remains awake while her sister Eri sleeps in *After Dark* (Murakami, 2007) are a few notable examples.

Like Rosbrow, I like Louis Breger's (1989) notion of the writer as psychoanalyst—especially when the writer in question is Murakami. While his stories could easily function as Rorschach blots for analysts in search of literary material to support their theories, I have little doubt about the kind of analyst Murakami is: He is *my* kind of analyst. That is to say, he understands that psychological life depends on the availability of a relational exchange (his paired characters suggest

our conjoined destinies), that trauma is inescapably pervasive in human experience, and that our lives are complexly embedded in overlapping relational systems including the societal and the global.

But what most distinguishes Murakami as an analyst after my own heart is that he continually grapples with what I call “existential uncertainty,” or the unbearable awareness that we can never be sure that others will participate in the relational give and take on which selfhood depends (Brothers, 2008). The depth and breadth of his examination of this aspect of the human condition makes him, in my eyes, the ultimate *connoisseur* of uncertainty. Shimao, who plays a key role in “U.F.O. in Kushiro,” could be speaking for all his characters when she says, “I mean, think about it: tomorrow there could be an earthquake; you could be kidnapped by aliens; you could be eaten by a bear. Nobody knows what’s going to happen” (Murakami, 2002b, p. 20).

It is not only the sudden disappearances of the relational partners of so many of Murakami’s characters that smacks the reader in the face with the bitter truth that our lives are steeped in uncertainty, but the very way his stories transport us to realms so far from the known and familiar that we are often at a loss to explain exactly what they are about. Such oddities as sardine storms, talking cats, and intelligent sheep contrast sharply with what Kathryn Schulz in her November 6, 2011, review of *IQ84* in the *New York Times Book Review* saw as “a lavish concern with the utterly mundane” (p. 12), and, as Rosbrow points out, strangely realistic narratives and characters who evoke our empathy. Schulz observed that the “bafflement” this contrast creates “is central to the experience of reading Murakami” (p. 12). Isn’t bafflement also central to the experience of being an analyst? After all, human lives are rife with both the strange and the banal, and even analysts, or should I say, *especially* analysts, are continually confronted with their ineffability. In what follows, I highlight some of Rosbrow’s notions, embroidering around them to support my take on Murakami.

### RELATIONALITY IN MURAKAMI

Rosbrow writes, “[Murakami’s] stories frequently involve themes around loss, searching for the lost person, and haunting feelings of regret and awareness of transience” (p. 215). Do they ever! Murakami makes it abundantly clear that in searching for a missing person, his characters are desperately searching for the other without whom their own sense of differentiated selfhood cannot be maintained. The urgency with which they attempt to reunite with a missing relational partner conveys how close to psychological annihilation they fear the loss of the other has brought them. I suspect that one of the reasons for the enormous popularity of Murakami’s fiction is the compelling way it represents what relational analysts accept as fundamental to human experience: selfhood depends on our relationships with others.

Spouses and lovers often leave his characters because of their failure to provide what self psychologists regard as selfobject experiences, that is, the empathically attuned responsiveness that sustains selfhood. For example, in “U.F.O. in Kushiro,” the protagonist’s wife leaves him because she says that he (Komura) has nothing inside that he can give her. Living with Komura, she says, is like living with “a chunk of air.” I wonder if all analysts have at one time or another encountered patients who appear to be as emotionally vacant as Komura seemed to his wife. I would like to think that, for such patients, the analytic relationship offers an opportunity to develop and use modes of relating that had never before been available. When these modes emerge in one

of my analytic dialogues I celebrate its arrival as a sign that the treatment has provided missed developmental experiences, without which further emotional growth would have been impossible.

### TRAUMA AS THE DESTRUCTION OF CERTAINTY

With reference to a line from “U.F.O. in Kushiro,” Rosbrow writes,

Murakami poetically condenses many aspects of post-traumatic experience: first, strangeness—the loss of the familiar; second, the past intruding into the present . . . ; and third, most importantly, the sense of randomness which follows in the wake of traumatic events, which wipe out our need sense of predictability and order. (Rosbrow, this issue, p. 221)

Permit me to expand on Rosbrow’s keen observations by relating them to my own understanding of trauma.

I cannot think of an author who more profoundly understands that trauma destroys the certainties that organize psychological life, and how such destruction is manifested, than Murakami. In story after story, the sudden and inexplicable disappearance of a relational partner confronts the protagonist with the falsity of his or her deeply held conviction that the partner would always remain available. Using a “relational systems” perspective, I refer to these convictions as *systemically emergent certainties* (SECs). Although such convictions have been called *organizing principles* (e.g., Atwood & Stolorow, 1984), I prefer the term, systemically emergent certainties, because it conveys that the themes that structure selfhood (a) form within and affect the overlapping systems that comprise our relational world, (b) specify the conditions under which we believe our relationships are subject to the orderly mutual influence necessary to sustain selfhood, and (c) tend to be experienced as unquestionable true.

When a traumatic experience destroys a sense of certainty about our going-on-being (Winnicott, 1965)—as, for example, when we lose a relational partner—we are likely to feel that we have been suddenly banished from all that is familiar, that we have been exiled from our homeland. We must then make our way in a world we no longer recognize, a world without meaning. If Murakami exemplifies *par excellence* those writers whom Rosbrow regards as “trauma analysts,” it is undoubtedly because he describes, in convincing detail, the dislocations of time and space suffered by his traumatized characters.

In my view, trauma entails not only a shattering experience that destroys our systemically emergent certainties but also our efforts at self-restoration. These efforts, which aim to relieve unbearable feelings of uncertainty, often involve the emergence of trauma-generated SECs that are rigid and inflexible. Unlike SECs that form in nontraumatic circumstances that are context sensitive and subject to change with our experience, trauma-generated SECs have the quality of iron certitude. The abused child’s unshakeable conviction that she deserves abuse because of her inherent badness is a good example. I imagine that Komura would not have become so enraged at Shimao for suggesting that the box he carried contained what was missing in him if she hadn’t confirmed a trauma-generated certitude that his wife was right, that all he has inside him is “a chunk of air.”

Trauma-generated SECs invariably make use of some form of dissociation. Rosbrow puts his finger on the way Murakami renders the dissociated world of the trauma exile when he says that his fiction has the quality of “waking dreams.” Living in a waking dream is very much the way

some traumatized people might characterize the haunted, uncanny, surreal quality of dissociated experience.

It is probably obvious that complex experiences generate uncertainty. I have proposed that the detachment and compartmentalization that constitute dissociation (see Brown, 2006) serve to reduce the complexity of lived experience and, concomitantly, the trauma survivor's experience of overwhelming uncertainty (Brothers, 2008). Murakami's 2001 book, *Underground*, about the Aum cult whose members attacked the Tokyo subways with Sarin gas, contains a vivid example of the dissociative reduction of complexity. Rosbrow notes that, according to Murakami, the cult members substituted their leader's simplistic narrative for their more complex ones. In my view, cult leaders are often traumatized individuals who locate their disavowed uncertainty in their followers, many of whom are also trauma victims, and who, in turn, locate their disavowed certainty in the leader (see Brothers, 2008, Chapter 7).

While both compartmentalization, which includes amnesia, fugue, and what is known as dissociative identity disorder, and detachment, which includes numbing, depersonalization, and derealization, play restorative roles insofar as they tend to simplify experience, they are also responsible for transporting the traumatized person into a world that seems ominous in its strangeness.

Our patients are not the only ones who suffer from the destruction of systemically emergent certainties; we analysts do too. And, like them, we tend to transform context-sensitive certainty into rigid certitude when we feel that our past traumas are threatening to reoccur in our analytic relationships. I doubt that Rosbrow speaks only for himself when he admits that at times he "can feel trapped with patient in a shared concrete state of mind or mood" (p. 218). When we feel endangered by what seems like the imminent repetition of an old trauma, we may feel compelled to eliminate experiences of unbearable uncertainty through our own dissociative reductions of complexity. Since our capacity to hope depends on being able to tolerate uncertainty we sometimes join our patients in their hopelessness. If we are fortunate, these moments are short-lived and we find ways, which include reading works by such trauma specialists as Murakami, to tolerate the uncertainty.

As Rosbrow points out, Murakami's fiction not only thrusts a reader into the surreal, dissociated world of trauma, it also deals with the ways in which we "awaken" from dissociation and deadness, or, from an analytic perspective, how we heal from trauma. It is about just how such healing occurs, however, that I find myself disagreeing with Rosbrow.

Writing about Komura's experience in "U.F.O. in Koshiro," Rosbrow (this issue) contends, "Through the presence of, or evocation of two seemingly opposite emotions—humor followed by rage—Komura is blasted out of his cocoon-like state by Shimao's interest, humor and finally, wild and even sadistic provocation" (p. 225). He finds in "the breaking through that happens between Komura and Shimao" an analogy to analytic work with trauma (p. 225). Rosbrow seems to suggest that the rage we sometimes evoke in patients can help rid trauma patients of their frozen, dissociated experience "like an explosion as a precondition for a soft landing" (p. 226).

In my clinical experience, when I have evoked rage in trauma patients, it is because I have inadvertently re-created situations that are all too reminiscent of the traumatic experiences for which they sought my help. Often I have done so when I felt that traumatic experiences in my own life threaten to recur. "The analyst," Rosbrow notes, "is faced with frustration dealing with the seeming impassivity of the numbstruck [*sic*], dissociated patient" (pp. 225–226). Perhaps we sometimes provoke numb, dissociated trauma patients because we cannot bear the way their impassivity threatens us with the retraumatizing loss of another relational partner. In my view,

it is not the blasting effect of having their fears of retraumatization evoked that our patients experience as healing, but the efforts we make to restore trust in the aftermath of such disruptions that diminishes their need for dissociation.

This is how I understand Komura's experience. I doubt that Murakami wanted to show that what was healing for him was his rage at Shimao's suggestion that what was missing in him was in the box. Rather it is the fact that she quickly disarms him and apologizes that seems to have relaxed him enough for him to resume his connection to her. This demonstration of his capacity for emotional relatedness, I believe, allowed him to relinquish his trauma-generated certitude that he is in fact the "chunk of air" that his wife accused him of being.

As I read Rosbrow's paper my thoughts returned again and again to a patient whose life could easily have inspired a Murakami story. When this patient was 2 years old, her father killed himself, leaving her in the care of her overburdened, neglectful, and at times abusive mother. With the permission of the patient, who is now in her early 40s, I now offer some lines she wrote to describe her experience:

About missing him—

You try to be analogous to him: be absent yourself, without will or weight or having anything. Missing is not a lack, it is what I have. Missing is shame for being full of effluvium, where he is perfectly not lacking or needing anything. I'm a pencil shaving of him. Missing is a make-work project. There is no one there who wants me to need him, and his absence is endless. They talk about the persistence of memory. I have no memory of him. I have the persistence of trying to know, to reach, to matter to someone who can't remember me, either.

But that's not true. He knows me, I know him, like the inside of my eyelid, invisible, indescribable, and all I can see when I close my eyes. I try to belong to him: I am colorless. But I am black while he is white. He is my magnet who repels.

Like so many of Murakami's characters, my patient's unrecoverable loss and her futile search for something to make up for her father's "endless absence" have haunted her life. Although she is beautiful, talented, and very successful professionally, she has been unable to find a satisfying love relationship and is often desperately lonely. She has become enraged with me, and filled with suicidal despair at times when I have not been physically available (e.g., during my vacations) or when I have failed to grasp the meaning of something she has tried to convey or when I have said something she experiences as provocative or misattuned. She hardly comes alive at these times. Rather she seems to withdraw further into her isolation. It is only when I manage to stay closely beside her in ways that she imagines a good father would have done, that she feels that her life is worthwhile and that meaningful connections with others seem possible. At these moments, I believe, she is able to relinquish her trauma-generated certitude that no one but her father could love her as she needs to be loved, and that no one but her father could be loved by her.

## MURAKAMI AND RELATIONAL SYSTEMS

Murakami's thorough-going commitment to the idea that our lives are inextricably enmeshed in the social and political is evident in virtually all of his writing. Catastrophic world events powerfully affect the lives of his characters and seem at once to reflect and amplify their experiences and to alter them. Rosbrow notes that although none of the characters in the collection of stories included in *After the Quake* (Murakami, 2002a) were present at the 1995 Kobe

earthquake, all are nevertheless deeply touched by it. Perhaps Komura's wife left him after being transfixed by images of the earthquake because they somehow reflected the damage she felt her marriage was inflicting on her life. Perhaps the silent images of earthquake-ravaged scenes that flash like a slideshow through Komura's mind represent both his ruined life, as Rosbrow suggests, and the lessening of his dissociative fog. We cannot be sure. However, we do know that Murakami means to convey that disasters that befall some people at a specific time and place affect us all, and continue to affect us long after they occur.

That human experience cannot be limited to a specific locale may well be the reason that the westernized version of Tokyo that Murakami's presents in his novels is very different from the city Sam Anderson found when he visited there in 2011. In his interview of Murakami that appeared in the October 23, 2011, edition of the *New York Times Magazine*, Anderson mentions that even Murakami's (1987) first novel, *Hear the Wind Sing*, evokes a thorough cross-section of Western culture with references to Lassie, The Mickey Mouse Club, Bob Dylan, Elvis Presley and the like. East and West is clearly an arbitrary division for Murakami. He shows us over and over that we all share the same world.

Rosbrow tells us that Murakami's writing "enlivens" him and allows him to expand his imagination. "Reading [Murakami]," he confides, "helps me shake off deadening moods, and resurface into a bright, blooming awake state" (p. 218). I think Rosbrow would agree that when we read a work by Murakami, not only do we embark on an extraordinary literary adventure, we may even be furthering our efforts to heal our trauma patients—and ourselves.

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## CONTRIBUTOR

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